

Message Text

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PAGE 01 BUENOS 09753 01 OF 02 212158Z

ACTION ARA-14

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FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3840

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BUENOS AIRES 9753

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PGOV, AR

SUBJECT: VIDELA ANTICIPATES JUNTA CHANGES, A NEW "FOURTH MAN"
POSITION AND HIS "POLITICAL PROPOSAL": IMPORTANT
GOVERNMENT DISCUSSIONS AND PRONOUNCEMENTS EXPECTED
THIS WEEK

REF: BUENOS AIRES 9571

SUMMARY: PRESIDENT VIDELA HAS OUTLINED FOR THE PRESS
HOW HE SEES THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE EVOLVING
NEXT YEAR INTO A NEW JUNTA ACCOMPANIED BY A "FOURTH
MAN" ARRANGEMENT. VIDELA PROPOSES TO CONTINUE IN THE
PRESIDENCY -- AS THE FOURTH MAN -- WHEN THE
COMPOSITION OF THE JUNTA CHANGES. HE EXPECTS ADMIRAL
MASSERA TO RETIRE FROM THE NAVY FIRST. VIDELA'S
COMMENTS SUGGEST THAT THE ARMED FORCES MAY REACH AN
AGREEMENT ON THESE POINTS IN A SERIES OF MEETINGS
DURING THE COURSE OF THE CURRENT WEEK. VIDELA IS ALSO
EXPECTED TO PROVIDE FURTHER DETAILS THIS WEEK
REGARDING HIS PROPOSALS FOR RETURNING THE COUNTRY
EVENTUALLY TO CIVILIAN, DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT. THE
COMPLICATED PRECONDITIONS VIDELA REPORTEDLY HAS LAID DOWN FOR
AGREEING TO GIVE UP HIS POST AS ARMY COMMANDER WHILE CONTINUING
AS FOURTH MAN, HOWEVER, SUGGEST TO US THAT FULL JUNTA
AGREEMENT MAY NOT BE AS IMMINENT AS THE PRESS REPORTS SUGGEST.
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PAGE 02 BUENOS 09753 01 OF 02 212158Z

IT MAY BE THAT, BY THESE STATEMENTS, VIDELA SEEKS TO PREEMPT
ADMIRAL MASSERA AND REESTABLISH HIS REPUTATION AS THE GOVERNMENT'S
LEADING PROPONENT AND EXECUTOR OF PLANS FOR REDEMOCRATIZATION.
END SUMMARY.

1. FROM ALL APPEARANCES THIS WILL BE A WEEK OF IMPORTANT
POLITICAL SPEECHES AND DECISIONS, OR AT LEAST DISCUSSIONS,

CONCERNING THE COUNTRY'S POLITICAL FUTURE. THE WEEK'S EVENTS INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

(A) TODAY, MONDAY, THE SECRETARIES GENERAL OF THE THREE ARMED SERVICES, GENERAL BIGNONE (ARMY), REAR ADMIRAL FRACASSI (NAVY) AND BRIG. LAMI DOZO (AIR FORCE) MEET TO DISCUSS THE MECHANICS AND TIMING OF REPLACING THE CURRENT THREE-MAN MILITARY JUNTA OF SERVICE CHIEFS AND PUTTING INTO EFFECT THE "FOURTH MAN" SCHEME, POSSIBLY IN THE LATTER PART OF 1978.

(B) TOMORROW, DECEMBER 20, PRESIDENT VIDELA WILL GIVE A MAJOR SPEECH IN WHICH HE MAY PROVIDE FURTHER INSIGHTS INTO HIS "POLITICAL PROPOSAL" FOR EVENTUALLY MOVING THE COUNTRY DOWN THE ROAD TO A CONSTITUTIONAL FEDERAL REPUBLIC.

(C) ON DECEMBER 21 ALL THE ACTIVE DUTY MAJOR AND BRIGADIER GENERALS IN THE ARMY WILL MEET IN THE LAST OF THEIR PERIODIC GENERAL ASSEMBLIES THIS YEAR, UNDER THE CHAIRMANSHIP OF THEIR COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, PRESIDENT VIDELA.

(D) ON THE SAME DAY, THE CHIEFS OF STAFF OF THE THREE SERVICES, MAJOR GENERAL VIOLA (ARMY), VICE ADMIRAL LAMBRUSCHINI (NAVY) AND BRIG. GRAFIGNA (AIR FORCE) WILL MEET TO TAKE UP AT A HIGHER LEVEL THE RESULTS OF TODAY'S SECRETARIES GENERALS' MEETING REGARDING THE JUNTA CHANGE AND THE "FOURTH MAN" PROPOSAL.

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 BUENOS 09753 01 OF 02 212158Z

(E) THE MILITARY JUNTA IS SCHEDULED TO MEET DECEMBER 22. ACCORDING TO PRESS ACCOUNTS, THE JUNTA IS PREPARED AT THIS MEETING TO REACH A FINAL DECISION AS TO THE NEW GOVERNMENT SUPERSTRUCTURE DURING THE 1979-82 PERIOD - UNLESS THERE ARE SETBACKS IN THE TWO PREPARATORY SESSIONS.

(F) ON THE SAME DAY, IN WHAT IS PROBABLY A SIDE EVENT, PLANNING MINISTER DIAZ BESSONE IS SCHEDULED TO GIVE A TALK TO FLAG OFFICERS OF THE THREE SERVICES ON HIS NATIONAL PLAN.

(G) ON SATURDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 24, PRESIDENT VIDELA WILL ADDRESS THE NATION ON RADIO AND TELEVISION WITH THE TRADITIONAL PRESIDENTIAL CHRISTMAS EVE SPEECH. (ACCORDING TO PRESS ACCOUNTS, PRESIDENT VIDELA WILL SPEND CHRISTMAS EVE IN THE LITTLE TOWN OF CAUCETE, PROVINCE OF SAN JUAN, WHICH WAS LARGELY DESTROYED BY THE RECENT EARTHQUAKE. ADMIRAL MASSERA PLANS TO SPEND HIS CHRISTMAS EVE AT THE USHUAIA NAVAL BASE, A SYMBOLIC GESTURE IN CONNECTION WITH ARGENTINA'S MARITIME CLAIMS IN THE BEAGLE CHANNEL.)

2. VIDELA HAS THE PRESS AND PARTY POLITICANS SALIVATING AS A RESULT OF COMMENTS HE HAS MADE OVER THE PAST WEEK WITH REGARD

TO PLANS FOR REORGANIZING THE JUNTA AND UNLEASHING HIS
"POLITICAL PROPOSAL". VIDELA CONFIRMED TO PRESIDENTIAL PALACE
REPORTERS LAST THURSDAY THAT THE MILITARY JUNTA WOULD DECIDE
BEFORE THE END OF THIS YEAR THE DATE FOR ENDING THE
TEMPORARY EXPEDIENT WHEREBY HE HAD BEEN AUTHORIZED TO HOLD
SIMULTANEOUSLY THE POSITIONS OF COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE ARMY
AND PRESIDENCY OF THE NATION. NOTING THAT THE SECRETARIES
GENERAL WERE STUDYING VARIOUS PLANS, VIDELA SAID THAT HE WAS
PERSONALLY IN FAVOR OF A PHASED RETIREMENT OF THE CURRENT JUNTA
MEMBERS PRIOR TO THE STATUTORY END OF THE JUNTA'S THREE YEAR
MANDATE, ON MARCH 24, 1979. IN HIS OPINION, THE JUNTA MEMBERS
SHOULD RETIRE IN THE ORDER OF THEIR RESPECTIVE SENIORITY AS
SERVICE COMMANDERS. (IN THIS WAY ADMIRAL MASSERA WOULD BE
EXPECTED TO STEP DOWN FIRST, THEN VIDELA AND LASTLY BRIGADIER
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 BUENOS 09753 01 OF 02 212158Z

AGOSTI.) THE IMPLICATION IN VIDELA'S COMMENTS, AS REPORTED IN
THE PRESS, WAS THAT THE NEWLY SELECTED
SERVICE CHIEFS WOULD CHOOSE A "FOURTH MAN" TO EXERCISE THE

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 01 BUENOS 09753 02 OF 02 212223Z
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BUENOS AIRES 9753

EXECUTIVE POWER OF THE PRESIDENCY DURING THE SECOND STAGE OF
GOVERNMENT (FROM MARCH 1979 TO MARCH 1982). VIDELA LEFT NO
DOUBT ABOUT THE FACT THAT HE INTENDED THIS TASK TO FALL
TO HIM.

3. HOWEVER, VIDELA CONTINUED, THREE PRECONDITIONS WERE
NECESSARY IN HIS OPINION BEFORE A NEW SCHEME OF POWER COULD GO
INTO EFFECT WITH A "FOURTH MAN" EXERCISING THE PRESIDENCY:

(A) THERE HAD TO BE A DECISION THAT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD EXERCISE TOTAL CONTROL OVER THE ANTI-SUBVERSIVE APPARATUS.

(B) MEDIUM AND LONG TERM POLITICAL PLANS HAD TO BE DECIDED UPON;
AND

(C) A DECISION HAD BEEN MADE CLEARLY DELINEATING THE ROLES OF THE PRESIDENCY AND THE JUNTA. THIS WAS FURTHER EXPLAINED IN ONE ACCOUNT TO IMPLY THAT VIDELA WOULD NOT AGREE TO ASSUME THE FOURTH MAN ROLE THEORETICALLY SUBORDINATE TO THE NEW JUNTA UNLESS THERE WAS A PRIOR AGREEMENT OVER THE POLITICAL PROPOSAL TO BE EXECUTED AND HE WAS GIVEN WIDE LATITUDE TO ACCOMPLISH HIS TASK.

4. VIDELA WAS ALSO QUOTED AS HAVING SAID THAT THE MOMENT HAD ARRIVED FOR ARTICULATING THE OUTLINES OF HIS POLITICAL PROPOSAL. HE REPORTEDLY DID NOT DISCARD THE POSSIBILITY OF LAUNCHING HIS CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 BUENOS 09753 02 OF 02 212223Z

PROPOSAL AS EARLY AS MARCH 24, 1978. FEDERALIST POLITICAL PARTY LEADER RICARDO BALLESTRA HAS TOLD THE EMBASSY THAT HE WAS IN A MEETING LAST WEEK IN WHICH VIDELA TOLD HIM (AND PRESUMABLY OTHER MODERATE, PRO-ARMY POLITICAL PARTY LEADERS THAT VIDELA'S POLITICAL PLAN WOULD BE LAUNCHED SIMULTANEOUSLY WITH THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW POLITICAL YEAR, I.E. IN MARCH 1978.

5. IN A SEPARATE DEVELOPMENT REPORTED IN THE PRESS, ANOTHER POLITICAL PARTY POLITICIAN, VETERAN LEADER OF THE UCRP RICARDO BALBIN, RECENTLY MADE A DINNER SPEECH TO HIS RADICAL PARTY COLLEAGUES IN WHICH HE STATED THAT TWO YEARS OF POLITICAL INACTIVITY FOR THE PARTY WAS ENOUGH AND PREDICTED THAT "NEXT MARCH THINGS ARE GOING TO HAPPEN. THERE WILL BE A CHANGE IN OUR ATTITUDE". (COMMENT: BALBIN'S COMMENTS ARE PROBABLY INDEPENDENT OF VIDELA'S TIMETABLE AND ARE RELATED TO THE FACT THAT THE RADICALS SEE THE RECENT ECONOMIC CONTRACTION WORSENING NEXT MARCH AND THEREFORE PRESENTING THE PARTY WITH A READY-MADE TARGET OF OPPORTUNITY.)

6. COMMENT: VIDELA'S STATEMENTS TO THE PRESS CORPS CONCERNING A NEW JUNTA AND A FOURTH MAN APPEAR TO SUBSTANTIATE GENERAL VIOLA'S RECENT COMMENTS TO THE AMBASSADOR (REFTEL). WHAT VIDELA APPEARS TO BE SAYING, IN ESSENCE, IS THAT HIS FIRST PRECONDITION FOR GIVING UP HIS POSITION AS ARMY CHIEF AND STEPPING DOWN FROM THE JUNTA NEXT YEAR IS THAT NAVY CHIEF, ADMIRAL MASSERA, LEAVE FIRST. WITH RESPECT TO THIS ISSUE, EMBASSY'S NAVY SOURCES STATE THAT ADMIRAL MASSERA HAS ALREADY DECIDED TO STEP DOWN IN SEPTEMBER OR OCTOBER 1978 AND THAT THE NEXT MAN IN LINE, NAVY CHIEF OF STAFF ADMIRAL LAMBRUSCHINI HAS BEEN PICKED TO TAKE HIS PLACE. (THIS INFORMATION EVIDENTLY

ALSO LEAKED TO THE PRESS, AS PALACE REPORTERS ASKED VIDELA FOR COMMENT. VIDELA RESPONDED THAT EACH SERVICE HAD ITS OWN RULES TO FOLLOW IN SELECTING ITS COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, MEANING THEREBY CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 BUENOS 09753 02 OF 02 212223Z

THAT VIDELA WAS NOT ATTEMPTING TO INFLUENCE THE OUTCOME OF THE SUCCESSORSHIP ISSUE IN THE NAVY.)

7. HOWEVER, IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN WHETHER THE JUNTA IS AS CLOSE TO A FINAL DECISION ON ALL OF THE ISSUES RELATING TO THE FOURTH MAN, AS THE PRESS ACCOUNTS SUGGEST. WE WOULD BE SURPRISED IF A FULL AGREEMENT WERE WITHIN REACH THIS COMING WEEK ON THE THREE PRECEPTS REPORTED IN PARAGRAPH 3, ABOVE. WE FIND IT DIFFICULT TO PREDICT, FOR EXAMPLE, WHAT VIDELA WILL BE ABLE TO REVEAL THIS WEEK IN TERMS OF A VIABLE PLAN FOR DEMOCRATIZING THE POLITICAL PROCESS. INTERIOR MINISTER HARGUINDEGUY'S SPEECH MAKING CUSTOMARILY HAS FOLLOWED A PATTERN OF SEEMING TO QUALIFY VIDELA'S MORE PROMISING PRONOUNCEMENTS OF A POLITICAL OPENING, THUS PROVIDING A ROUGH WEATHERVANE OF THE DEGREE OF OPPOSITION IN THE ARMED FORCES TO VIDELA'S POLITICAL PLANS. HARGUINDEGUY'S INTENT PRESUMABLY IS TO REASSURE THE CONSERVATIVE MILITARY, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME ACTING AS A RESTRAINT ON THE UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS OF SOME PARTY POLITICANS. HOWEVER, HARGUINDEGUY'S PUBLIC STATEMENTS IN RECENT WEEKS HAVE ATTAINED A NEW LEVEL IN SOWING PUBLIC CONFUSION AND RAISE OUR DOUBTS THAT JUNTA-LEVEL AGREEMENT IS NEAR ON WHAT'S TO BE DONE IN TERMS OF RETURNING THE COUNTRY TO POLITICAL NORMALITY. LAST WEEK HARGUINDEGUY ACCLAIMED THAT THERE WAS NO IMMINENT POLITICAL OPENING IN THE WIND IN EITHER AN ELECTORAL SENSE OR IN TERMS OF ANY KIND OF ROLE FOR THE OLD POLITICAL PARTY HACKS. A FEW WEEKS EARLIER, HE STATED THAT THERE WOULD NOT BE ANY TRANSITION FROM A MILITARY TO A CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT BEFORE 1987 AT THE EARLIEST, AND, IF HE HAD HIS DRUTHERS, NOT BEFORE 1991. VIDELA HAD TO SOFTEN SOMEWHAT HARGUINDEGUY'S COMMENT IN A SUBSEQUENT STATEMENT, NOT ONLY BECAUSE IT APPEARED TO GO TOO FAR IN THROWING COLD WATER ON SPECULATION ABOUT VIDELA'S PLANS FOR A POLITICAL OPENING, BUT ALSO BECAUSE THIS WAS THE FIRST TIME THAT A HIGH-RANKING GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL HAD APPEARED TO PIN HIMSELF DOWN TO TRANSITION DATES. HARGUINDEGUY FOLLOWED WITH THE CURIOUS COMMENT LAST WEEK THAT

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 BUENOS 09753 02 OF 02 212223Z

HE WAS THE FAITHFUL AND AUTHORITATIVE INTERPRETER OF THE WILL OF THE ARMED FORCES IN THE POLITICAL ARENA AND THE VIDELA NEVER TOLD HIM WHAT TO SAY OR WHAT NOT TO SAY.

8. SOME MONTHS AGO, A CIVILIAN SOURCE IN THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENCY, WHO PERSONALLY FAVORS AN EARLY TRANSITION TO DEMOCRATIC RULE, TOLD US THAT VIDELA PLANNED TO BEGIN THAT PROCESS IN MARCH 1978 BY NAMING CIVILIANS TO SOME PROVINCIAL GOVERNORSHIPS AND OTHER GOVERNMENT JOBS. HOWEVER, SUBSEQUENT STATEMENTS BY OTHER GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND POLITICAL OBSERVERS SUGGEST THAT VIDELA'S TIMETABLE CALLS FOR STRETCHING OUT THE TRANSITION PROCESS AND MAINTAINING A MIXED CIVILIAN-MILITARY CHARACTER TO THE GOVERNMENT FOR A PROLONGED PERIOD. HOPEFULLY, EVENTS THIS WEEK WILL PROVIDE US WITH A CLEARER UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROSPECTS. END COMMENT.
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Message Attributes

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